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ABSTRACT

The social and educational status of children from homeless families was studied in four cohorts of Cleveland (Ohio) public school students who requested transportation from homeless shelters for the school years from 1987-88 to 1990-91. Total cohort size ranged from the 1987-88 high of 39 students to the 1990-91 low of 22 students, with 36 students in 1988-89 and 28 students in 1989-90. In the second through fourth cohorts there was a higher percentage of African American students than the 69 percent typical of the school district. The great majority of students in all cohorts were elementary school students, and almost all received free or reduced price meals. Between 7 and 13 percent withdrew in each cohort year, but few actually dropped out of school. The suspension rate for all cohorts was relatively low, but over half transferred at least once during the year of homelessness. Overall results suggest that the experience of homelessness is not as detrimental to the educational experience as had been hypothesized, although the experience appears more detrimental for secondary school students. Cohort students did not evidence particular behavioral problems. Support and special programs appeared influential in keeping homeless students in school. Recommendations are made for program improvement. Appendix A contains a table of cohort data. Appendixes B through J contain bar graphs of student characteristics. (SLD)

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THE IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS:
As experienced by four cohorts of Cleveland Public School students 1987-1991

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THE IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS ON SELECTED STUDENTS: As experienced by four cohorts of Cleveland Public School students from 1987-1988 to 1990-1991

INTRODUCTION: THE HOMELESS STUDENT

According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are 220,000 school aged homeless children in the nation; 30% of these children do not attend school. The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that the number of homeless children is much higher, ranging between 500,000 and 750,000, with 57% not attending school regularly.

Because the stress of homelessness makes education a low priority, homeless children are frequently absent from school and/or exhibit behavior problems. Barriers to school attendance for homeless children include: lack of social skills, apathy towards school, poor nutrition and the inability to afford clothing or school supplies. Often, homeless children experience developmental lags, depression and anxiety due to the lack of stability in their lives. They are also likely to exhibit behavior problems.

A report of the Conference of Mayors, "A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 1990", estimated that the city of Cleveland haD between 5,000 to 10,000 homeless people. The same report stated that there was a 24% increase in emergency shelter requests in 1990 when compared with 1989.

The Cleveland Public Schools began providing transportation for children who lived in shelters in the 1987-1988 school year. Communication between shelters and the District was limited at that time. Many mothers and children residing at shelters were escaping abusive situations at home and anonymity issues were not completely understood by the District. To start working more effectively together, a partnership was developed between shelters and the District. Better communication between the shelters and the District, as well as improved procedures, resulted in the District's being better prepared to respond to the increasing numbers of students residing in shelters. Twelve times more homeless children were served by the transportation department during the 1990-1991 school year than in 1987-1988.

Although it has been well documented that the number of homeless families is on the rise, little is known about the social and educational status of children from these families. Do these children stay in school? Do they succeed in terms of promotion? Do they exhibit disciplinary problems? While experiencing homelessness, are students forced to transfer from school to school? These and other questions are addressed by this study.

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore these questions, four cohorts of selected Cleveland Public School students who requested transportation from shelters in the 1987-1988, 1988-1989, 1989-1990, and 1990-1991 school years were followed until the 1990-1991 school year.

Identifying homeless students using transportation requests limits the study; however, accurately identifying homeless students utilizing other methods is difficult. Most students were identified as homeless only once. (See Appendix A.) Homelessness is often not reported to school authorities. Many homeless students were not, therefore, included in the cohorts because they did not use shelter facilities, or even if they used shelter facilities they did not request transportation.

This is the District's first attempt to study the impact of homelessness on students over time. Demographics and student outcome data were analyzed, and results can be used to refine further studies.

FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHICS

This section provides a demographic profile of the cohorts.

Racial Distribution. The racial breakdown for the District is 69% African American, 23% white, 6% Latino, 1% Asian, and less than one percent Native American. (Details on these demographics are presented in Appendix A.) The racial distribution for the second, third and fourth cohorts indicated that a higher percentage of African-American students were represented in the cohorts than in the District as a whole. Each cohort had an increasingly high percent of African-American students remaining in school. This is consistent with the District's higher dropout and withdrawals rates for White and Latino students than for African-American students.

Gender Distribution. The gender breakdown for the District is 48% female, 52% male. The cohorts' proportion of males and females closely followed the District's gender distribution.

School Level. The District's student distribution by level was 9% kindergarten, 51% elementary (grades 1-6), and 40% secondary (grades 7-12). The great majority of the students in the cohorts were elementary students. They ranged from 72% (1987-1988 cohort) to 85% (1989-1990 cohort) of the total number of identified homeless students.

Socio-Economic Status. The poverty rate for the District is 75%. Almost all students received free or reduced price meals. Thus,

the poverty rate of the students included in this study was higher than for the District as a whole.

Withdrawal[1] rates. Between 7% (1987-1988 cohort) and 13% (1989-1990 cohort) of the elementary students withdrew in the year of homelessness. The percentage of elementary students withdrawing in the year after homelessness increased. Between 12% (1988-1989 cohort) and 18% (1987-1988 cohort) of the secondary students withdrew in the year of homelessness. The 1987-1988 cohort showed a high secondary withdrawal rate after the year of homelessness (42%). This pattern was not reflected in the other cohorts.

Participation in Special Programs. The proportion of special education students was about 7%. The 1987-1988 cohort had the lowest entering percent (5%) and the 1990-1991 cohort had the highest (11%). Special education students who experienced homelessness remained in school. The first cohort (1987-1988) had the largest proportion of gifted (major work) students (18%). Other cohorts had a maximum of 3%. Few bilingual students were in any cohort.

Participation in Remedial Reading Programs. Students in elementary grades have a 28% participation rate in remedial reading programs. Between 10% (1987-1988 cohort) to 16% (1988-1989 and 1989-1990) of the elementary students were enrolled in reading support programs in the year of homelessness. The percent of secondary students enrolled in reading support programs was much lower, no more than 5%.

OUTCOMES

Several outcome variables were examined for each cohort. These included dropout and suspension rates; transfers and tardiness; attendance, promotion, and failure rates.

- The District's dropout rate is 8%. Very few in the homeless cohorts dropped out of school. The exception was the first cohort, in which the higher (11%) dropout rate occurred in the second year after identification. This may have been related to the proportion of secondary students.

- The suspension rate for all cohorts was relatively low (less than 8% suspended even once), with the exception of the first cohort where the suspension rate was 14% in the second and third year after homelessness. For the 1988-1989 and 1989-1990 cohorts the suspension rates were constant over time at 5% and 7% respectively. (See Appendix B.)

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[1] A student who exits the District is defined as a **Withdrawal.**

- Over half of the students transferred[2] at least once during the year of homelessness. Stability increased in the years that followed the homeless experience. In the 1987-1988 cohort the transfer rate decreased from an original 64% to 18% in 1990-1991. In the other cohorts differences were less pronounced. (See Appendix C.)

- In the year of homelessness, most students were tardy at least once. The percent of students who were tardy at least once in that year ranged between 56% (1990-1991 cohort) to 71% (1988-1989 cohort). The percent of students who were tardy decreased over time. (See Appendix D.)

Attendance, promotion, and failure rates were examined separately for elementary and secondary students.

- The elementary attendance rate for the District was 91%. The attendance rate for elementary during the year of homelessness was as low as 78% (1988-1989). The attendance rate increased after the year of homelessness (never surpassing 90%). (See Appendix E.)

- The District's attendance rate was 81% for intermediate grades (7-8) and 70% for senior high grades (9-12). The secondary students' attendance rate during the year of homelessness was lower than for elementary students[3]. The range was from 46% (1987-1988 cohort) to 71% (1989-1990 cohort). Changes in the secondary attendance rates were erratic, never surpassing 75%. (See Appendix F.)

- The promotion rate for the District's elementary students was 94%. The promotion rate for elementary students in the year of homelessness ranged between 89% (1988-1989 and 1990-1991 cohorts) and 92% (1987-1988 and 1989-1990 cohorts). There are three cohorts for which at least two years worth of data are available. In two of these, the promotion rate decreased in the year after homelessness. (See Appendix G.)

- The promotion rate for secondary students in the District was 74%. The promotion rate for secondary students in the year of homelessness ranged between 22% (1987-1988 cohort) to 77% (1989-1990 cohort) in the year of homelessness. In subsequent years, the promotion rate was greater than in the year of homelessness for all cohorts. (See Appendix H.)

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[2] A students who moves from one school to another within the District is a **transfer**.

[3] Districtwide, elementary students have much higher attendance rate than do secondary students.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

The experience of homelessness was not as detrimental to the educational experience of students as hypothesized.

- To be homeless appears to have been more devastating educationally for secondary students than for elementary students.

- The majority of students who experienced homelessness stayed in school. Most of them were promoted. As it is true for the District as a whole, elementary students showed more success than did secondary students.

- Students who experienced homelessness did not evidence particular behavioral problems. Most of them were not suspended. The percent of students suspended in the year of homelessness was not greater than in other years.

- Students were more mobile in the year of homelessness and transferred more often in that year.

- The lack of representation of bilingual students in the cohorts may be due to a reluctance on the part of bilingual families (Latino) to use shelters that are not culturally and language specific.

Possible reasons for the limited negative impact of homelessness in the student's educational experience are as follows.

- The majority of students included in the study resided in shelters for battered women. These shelters provide an effective support system for women and children escaping abusive husbands and fathers.

- The school District in 1988 became more aware of the special needs of the homeless children. Specific institutional changes took place to respond to the increased numbers and needs of homeless students. An Education of Homeless Children Task Force was formed with school personnel and shelter representatives. Social services and tutoring became available for homeless children. The District became more sensitive to confidentiality issues.

- Homelessness is not limited to those who are unsuccessful in school. As shown, a relatively high percentage of gifted students were represented in the first cohort.

- Support systems/special programs appear to be influential in keeping in school students who experience homelessness. This was true for both major work (gifted and talented) and special education, as well as non-exceptional, youths.

CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that the experience of homelessness does not appear to be related to gender or race. Of homeless students identified in 1987-1988, the ratio of African-American to Other students and the ratio of male to female reflected the District's ratios.

Elementary students experienced more success than secondary students in terms of remaining in school, attending school, achieving academic success, and being promoted.

For both elementary and secondary students, attendance was lowest during the year of homelessness. This is in line with the national finding of poor attendance rates.

In general, students did not have major disciplinary problems; however, they exhibited chronic tardiness.

Due to the homeless students high mobility rate, tutoring services tailored to the individual needs of this population must provide continuity.

Responding to the basic needs (home, food and shelter) has to be assured through open communication with social service agencies and the schools.

Special attention must be given to secondary students. Runaway youths may be less identifiable in this age group but their needs are great.

The District must continue and intensify its efforts to coordinate services with shelters and other institutions serving the homeless. It appears that having any type of support system in place to some extent benefits to those experiencing major disruptions in their lives.

APPENDIX A

Description of the Cohorts

1987-1988 Cohort	1987-1988	1988-1989	1989-1990	1990-1991
Total N	39	36	28	22
# One Time Repeaters		1	2	
# Multiple Repeaters			1	1
# Elementary	28	24	18	14
# Secondary	11	12	10	8
# Male	19	18	16	13
# Female	20	18	12	9
# Native Amer	0	0	0	0
# White	9	6	3	2
# Black	28	28	24	20
# Hispanic	2	2	1	0
% Free Lunch	100	100	100	100
% Not Bilingual	97	97	100	100
% Not Dropout	97	94	89	100
% Major Work (Gifted)	10	11	14	18
% Special Ed.	5	6	4	4
% Special Elem Reading	10	14	14	9
% Special Sec Reading	3	0	4	4
# Elementary Withdrawal	7	25	6	14
# Secondary Withdrawal	18	25	6	14
Average Days Enroll (Elem)	100	150	168	153
Average Days Enroll (Secondary)	150	122	95	178

APPENDIX A (continued)

1988-1989 Cohort	1988-1989	1989-1990	1990-1991
Total N	160	149	127
# One Time Repeaters		7	10
# Multiple Repeaters		3	3
# Elementary	134	109	91
# Secondary	26	40	36
# Male	83	78	68
# Female	77	71	59
# Native Amer	2	2	2
# White	12	11	8
# Black	142	132	115
# Hispanic	5	4	2
% Free Lunch	99	99	100
% Not Bilingual	99	99	100
% Not Dropout	96	99	99
% Major Work (Gifted)	3	3	3
% Special Ed.	7	9	13
% Special Elem Reading	16	20	11
% Special Sec Reading	3	5	11
# Elementary Withdrawal	11	18	7
# Secondary Withdrawal	12	12	6
Average Days Enroll (Elem)	158	148	166
Average Days Enroll (Secondary)	160	152	163

APPENDIX A (continued)

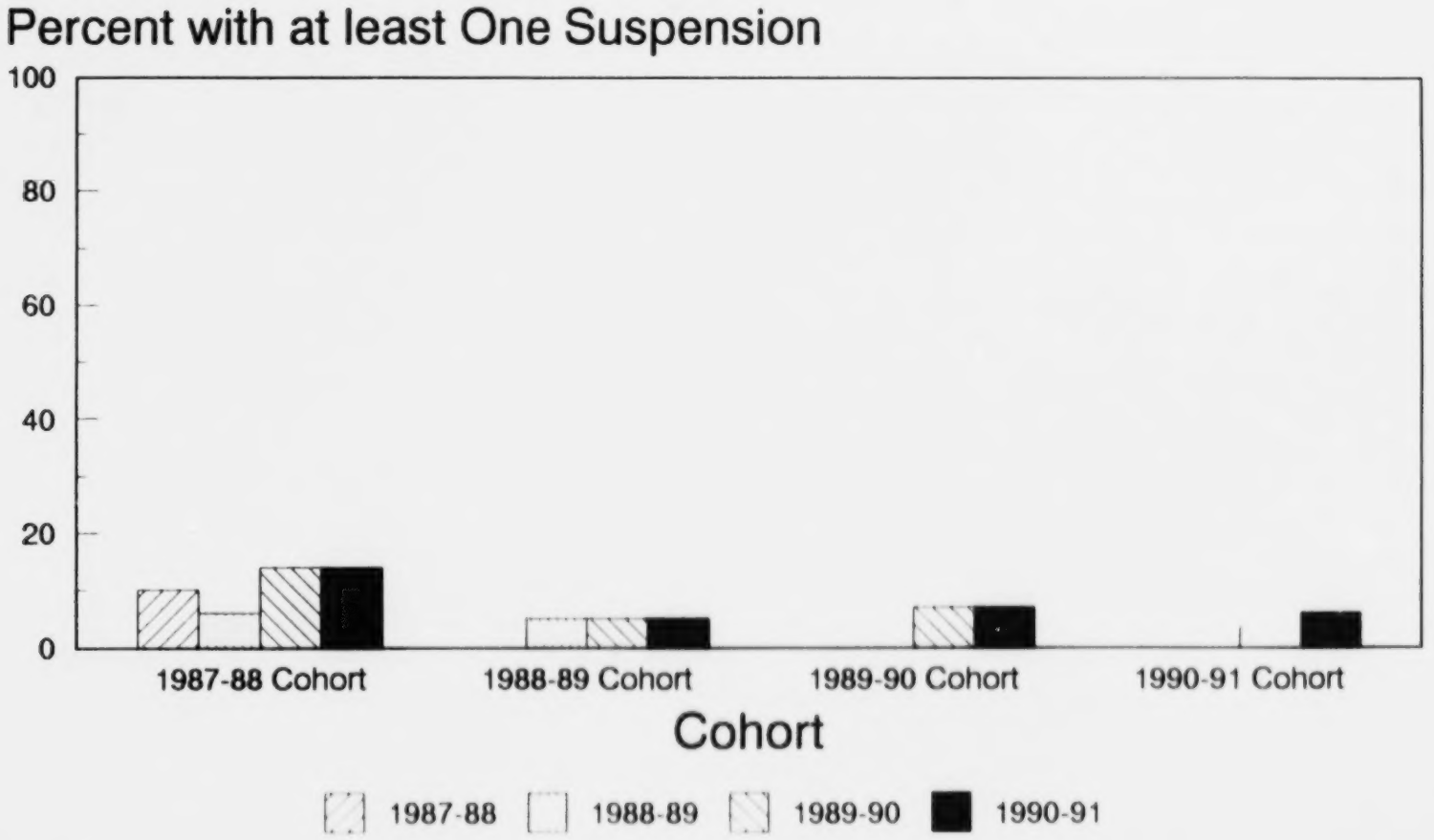
1989-1980 Cohort	1989-1990	1990-1991
Total N	287	255
# One Time Repeaters		11
# Pre-School	1	0
# Elementary	244	205
# Secondary	42	50
# Male	145	132
# Female	142	123
# Native Amer	0	0
# White	29	23
# Black	253	227
# Hispanic	5	5
% Free Lunch	100	100
% Not Bilingual	98	98
% Not Dropout	100	100
% Major Work (Gifted)	1	1
% Special Ed.	7	8
% Special Elem Reading	16	11
% Special Sec Reading	5	9
# Elementary Withdrawal	31	24
# Secondary Withdrawal	7	7
Average Days Enroll (Elem)	148	157
Average Days Enroll (Secondary)	145	155

APPENDIX A (continued)

1990-1991 Cohort	1990-1991
Total N	434
# Pre-School	3
# Elementary	350
# Secondary	81
# Male	206
# Female	228
# Native Amer	0
# White	53
# Black	370
# Hispanic	10
% Free Lunch	99
% Not Bilingual	98
% Not Dropout	100
% Major Work (Gifted)	2
% Special Ed.	11
% Special Elem Reading	13
% Special Sec Reading	4
# Elementary Withdrawal	40
# Secondary Withdrawal	14
Average Days Enroll (Elem)	153
Average Days Enroll (Secondary)	146

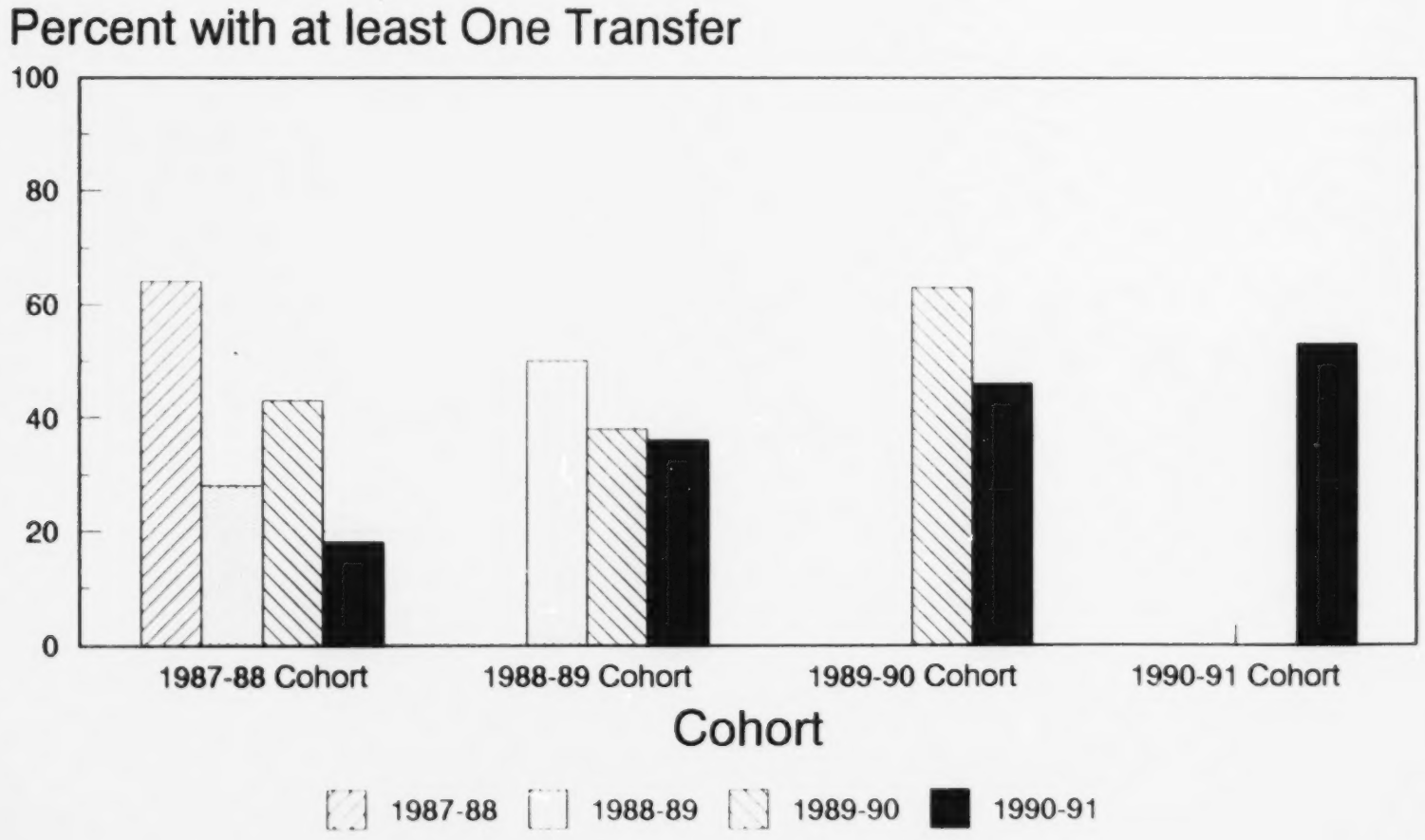
Appendix B

Percent of Students Suspended at least Once



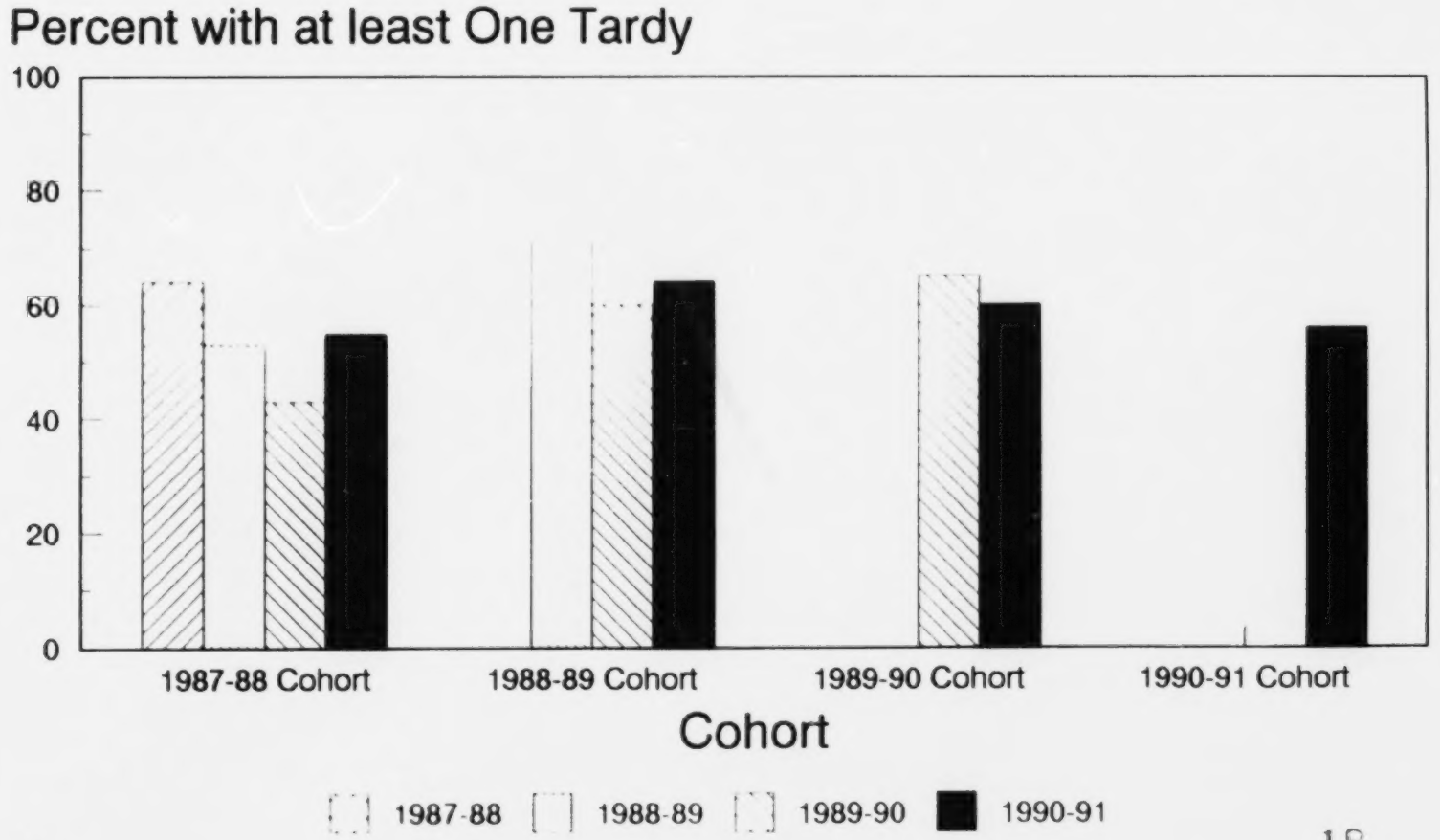
Appendix C

Percent of Students Transfering at least Once

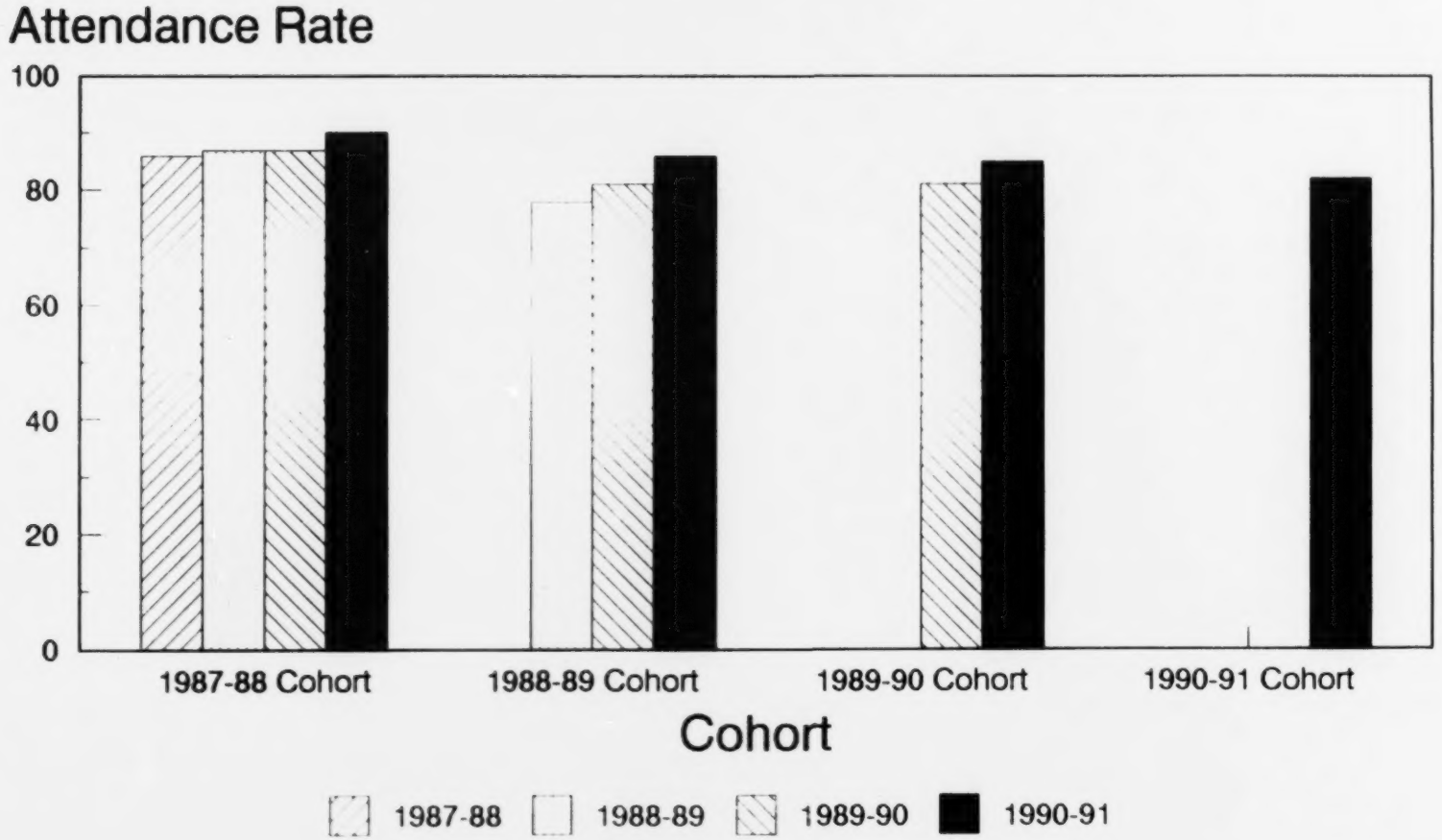


Appendix D

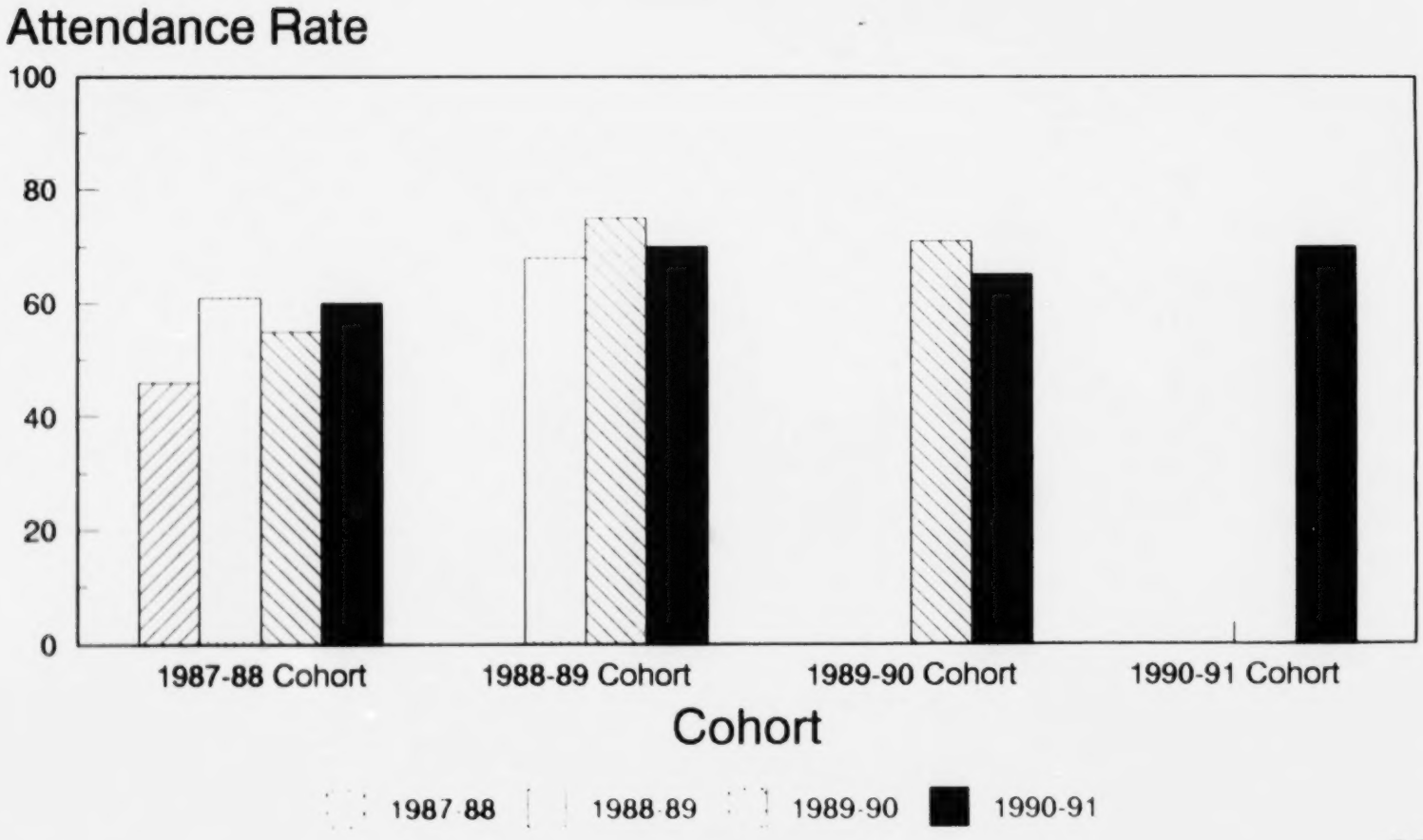
Percent of Students Tardy at least Once



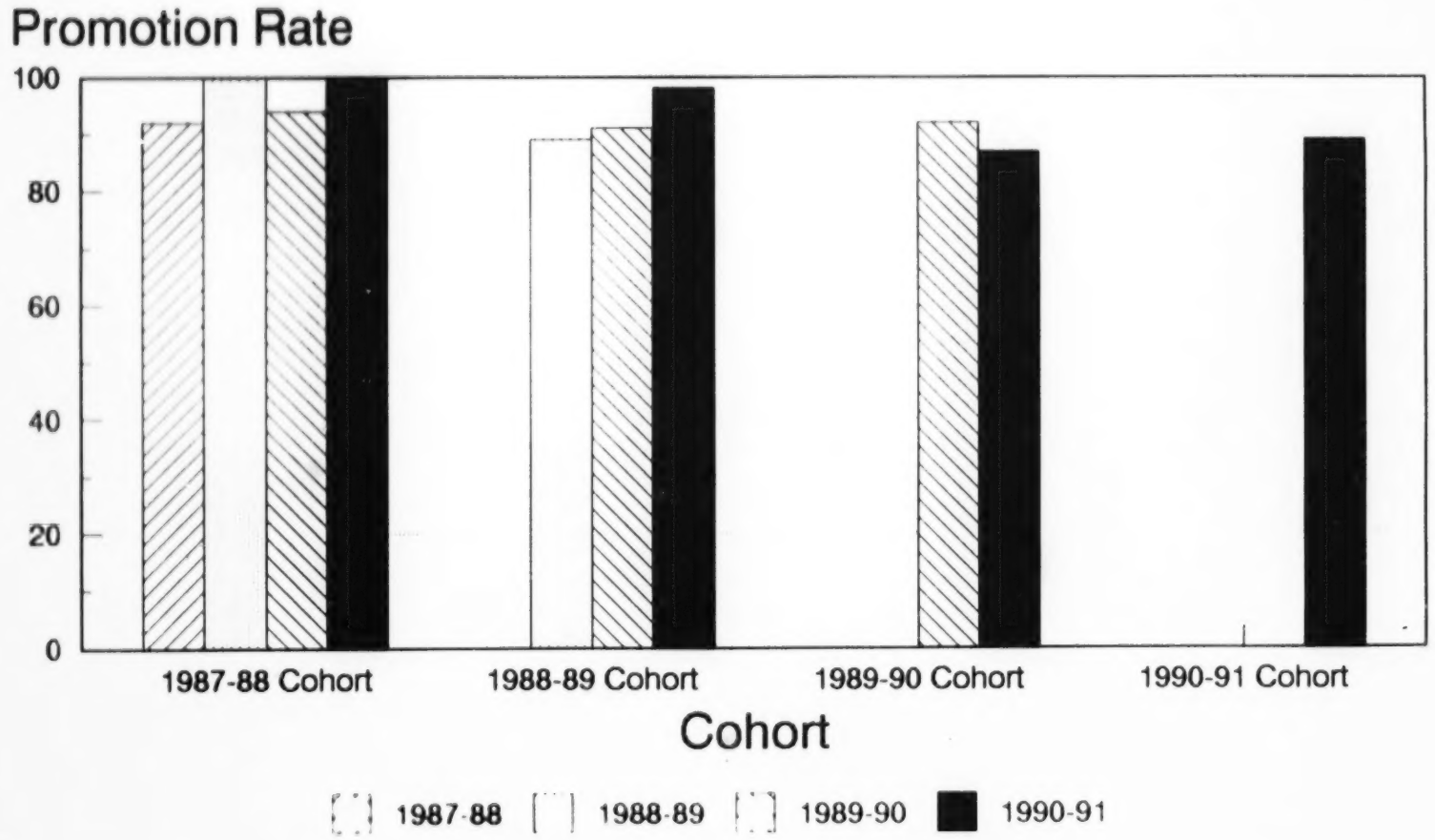
Appendix E
Elementary Attendance Rates



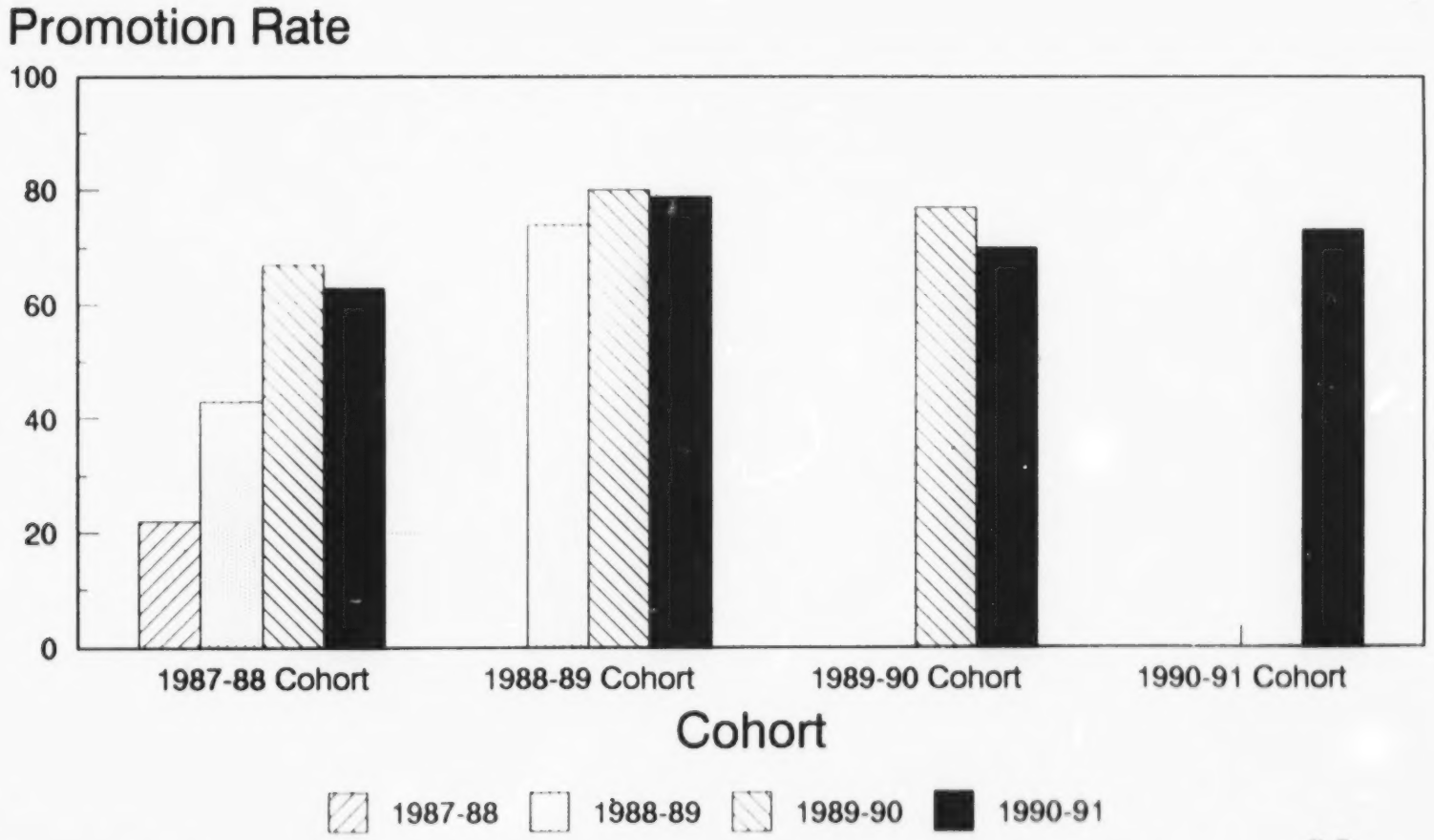
Appendix F
Secondary Attendance Rates



Appendix G
Elementary Promotion Rates

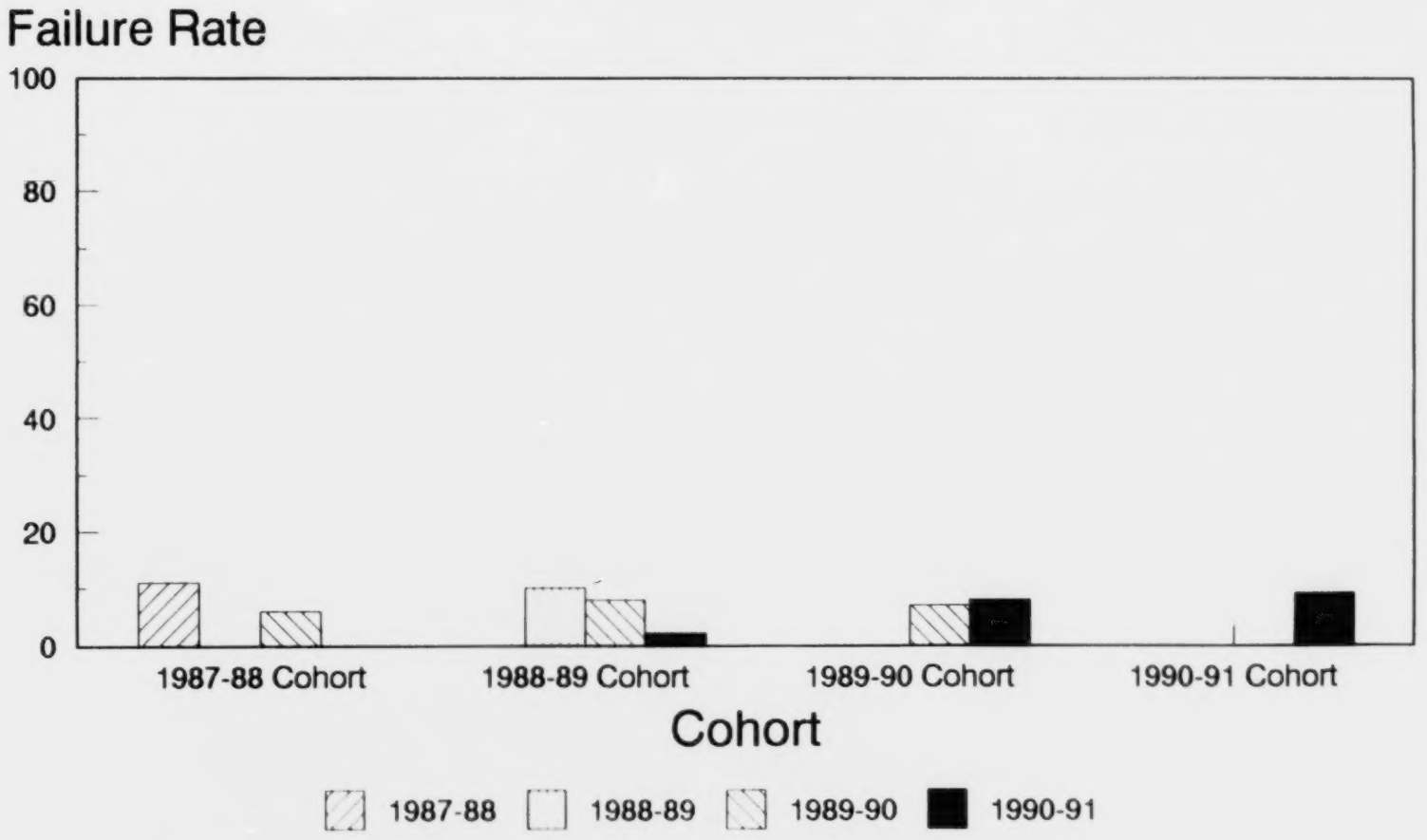


Appendix H
Secondary Promotion Rates



Appendix I

Elemenatary Failure Rates



Appendix J
Secondary Failure Rates